

The Night The Folk Movement Died

by Peter Stone Brown

Dylan Goes Electric!

Newport, Seeger, Dylan and the Night That Split the Sixties

by Elijah Wald

This year is the 50th Anniversary of Dylan playing an electric guitar with a band at the Newport Folk Festival. The date was July 25th, a pivotal date in the history of American popular music. This is an event that received far more publicity 40 years after it happened than when it happened, and there's every reason to believe this year will easily equal that and surpass it. One of the fascinating things about that night is even after all this time no two accounts of what went down are alike, whether those remembrances are from audience members, other performing musicians, members of the press, members of the board of directors of the Newport Folk Festival or other people working at the festival doing sound, as managers, road managers and roadies. More to the point, even the accounts of people who wrote about it when it happened don't necessarily match up.

Elijah Wald was clearly aware of all this when he decided to devote an entire book to what was approximately a 35-minute performance. Of course there's much more to it than that, and what makes this easily the definitive account of Newport '65 is that Wald explores in depth the various forces that caused that night to go down the way it did, in a manner that is reminiscent in its research of CP Lee's account of Dylan's legendary 1966 Manchester, England concert where an audience member shouted "Judas" in the book *Like The Night*.

The book starts with a detailed chapter on Pete Seeger that is part biography, but also details how what was eventually called "the folk movement" was pretty much his creation and ultimately filtered through his political worldview. Wald goes into great detail on how Seeger would simplify his banjo and guitar parts because he didn't want his instrumental prowess to interfere with the message of whatever song he was singing. A good part of the chapter is devoted to The Weavers, the first group to put folk music on the hit parade. The Weavers were often chastised by folk purists for rewriting traditional songs, and one song that was attacked was their hit version of Woody Guthrie's dust bowl ballad, "So Long, It's Been Good To Know Yuh," eliminating all references to the dust bowl. What a lot of people didn't know at the time and for a long time afterwards was that Guthrie himself rewrote the song for The Weavers and took home a pretty hefty advance for his efforts.

More fun is that Wald has discovered an apparent never released single on Vanguard Records by The Weavers of "Gotta Travel On" with a close to

rockabilly arrangement. The Weavers did record "Gotta Travel On" for their final studio album with Seeger (it was really a few songs by Seeger and most with his replacement Erik Darling), *Traveling On With The Weavers*. Before they were blacklisted, The Weavers records for Decca featured the Gordon Jenkins orchestra and quite a few of those songs have electric guitar solos. [Seeger, whose offstage persona was nothing like his onstage one quit The Weavers after they recorded a commercial for L&M cigarettes. The group who had been signed by Vanguard following their 1955 reunion concert at Carnegie Hall was in the process of recording their first studio album for the label when

Seeger departed. Vanguard, realizing Seeger was a major factor in the group, split his departure over two albums, the first with his replacement Erik Darling as guest artist, and the second with Seeger as departing artist. Unfortunately Vanguard has rarely been a company to list recording dates on its albums, including their Weavers box set, and for whatever reason was also a company that would release albums years after they'd been recorded.] Wald takes the Seeger introductory chapter up to the beginning of the '60s. While it is impossible to write about Seeger without writing about his politics, the blacklist, his appearance before HUAC and his trial for Contempt of Congress, Wald manages to keep a good deal of the focus on Seeger's music.

Wald applies the same approach to Bob Dylan, keeping the focus on the music, and this is where this book differs from most of the other innumerable books on Dylan because Wald presents Dylan as a rock and roller from the start, which in fact he was. He then follows Dylan to Minneapolis, where instead of attending the University of Minnesota, he learned about folk music from various sources discovering Woody Guthrie in the process and eventually makes his way to New York and Greenwich Village. Even when writing about the initial years in New York City, Wald downplays the Guthrie myth, points out that the first few reviews of Dylan were about his musicianship, not his songs, and pointing out that what Dylan was doing was playing folksongs with a wildness that not only echoes, but came from rock and roll. It's a view of Dylan that is refreshing and perceptive.

Wald then presents a history of the Newport Folk Festival, how it evolved from the Newport Jazz Festival, how Albert Grossman who would eventually manage Peter, Paul & Mary, Dylan and many other people was involved from the beginning, how a Board of Directors that would include Seeger, and Theo Bikel among many other was formed, and how Seeger would push the Festival towards his worldview in how the music was presented, what musicians were selected right down to how the musicians were paid.

At the same time Wald connects the folk movement to the Civil Rights movement, and eventually the peace movement, while also delving into a

brief but incisive history of the various “commercial” folk groups, most notably the Kingston Trio who arrived in the wake of The Weavers. Also included is a bit about the TV show *Hootenanny*, which blacklisted Seeger who along with Guthrie came up with the term, and subsequently was boycotted by many artists including Baez and Dylan, but not by a lot of other artists including The New Lost City Ramblers which included Seeger’s half-brother Mike. Wald also takes the time to point out the difference between groups like NCLR who were seriously studying traditional country music and the more collegiate groups who in a lot of ways were singing campfire songs, even if they weren’t campfire songs to begin with.

All of this leads up to the 1963 Newport Folk Festival. Dylan arrived at the festival as a songwriter who was just starting to be known outside of New York City and Boston where there was a strong folk music scene. His second album had only been out a couple of months, Peter, Paul & Mary’s cover of “Blowin’ In The Wind” was hovering around the top of the charts, Pete Seeger was singing his songs all around the country and had recorded them as well, and dozens of other singers were lining up to record his songs. Dylan arrived at Newport a new kid on the block, along with several other new kids on the block including Tom Paxton and Phil Ochs, and left it pretty much a star. Considering there were numerous other musicians also making their Newport debuts that summer including Mississippi John Hurt and Doc Watson, it was no small achievement. It was also the year Dylan would play along the most with the Seeger vision of Newport, singing a duet with the man himself at a topical song workshop and closing the festival with a grand finale of “Blowin’ In The Wind” joined by Peter, Paul & Mary, Baez, The Freedom Singers, Seeger and Theo Bikel, which was followed by everyone linking arms for “We Shall Overcome.”

Returning a year later, Dylan was now a star, a far more professional player, but with the exception of the inevitable duet with Joan Baez on “With God On Our Side,” performed no political material preferring what *Sing Out!* editor Irwin Silber would later refer to as inner-directed probing songs like “Mr. Tambourine Man,” “It Ain’t Me Babe” and “Chimes Of Freedom.” Also of major importance that year was a country artist named Johnny Cash, who made the connection between country and folk and always had an eye on the folk scene.

It should be pointed out that in those pre-Monterey and pre-Woodstock years, Newport was *the* festival. It presented an astounding array of musicians from city blues to country blues, from old time fiddlers to gospel singers to Irish and English balladeers to Cajun and Zydeco acts that few knew about to white and black gospel music to almost forgotten traditional singers. This diverse lineup was imitated but rarely equaled at similar festivals. On top of this Newport had a camaraderie between both the musicians and the audience that made it special.

Wald deftly uses all these elements to build up to Newport '65, a year with another stellar lineup, but also where a lot of strange things happened from Richard and Mimi Farina making their debut playing in a downpour to the emergence of Donovan to the legendary fistfight between Alan Lomax and Albert Grossman over Lomax's insulting introduction of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band. Dylan as he had the other two years played what was now called the Contemporary Songs Workshop, debuting an acoustic version of "Tombstone Blues" that didn't have the chorus. Dylan drew so many people to the workshop that their presence and their reluctance to let Dylan leave after a short set interfered with the other workshops taking place at the same time.

Wald details what went down at the rehearsal off festival grounds that night of Dylan, the Butterfield rhythm section, their band new guitarist Mike Bloomfield, and keyboard players Al Kooper and Barry Goldberg. He goes into equal detail about the sound check the next afternoon, some of which can be seen in the documentary about Newport, *Festival* by Murray Lerner with a lot of new details from various people who were assisting during the sound check.

The Paul Butterfield Blues Band making up for a set rained out earlier in the day actually started the evening concert, though in a lot of ways they were really providing walking in music. Pete Seeger started the evening by playing a tape of a new born baby (his niece) into the microphone and asking everyone to sing to that baby and tell it what kind of world it would grow up into. This was followed by a bunch of singers who really didn't have all that much to do with each other musically. Bob Dylan came on fairly early in the show, something he wasn't exactly thrilled about to a fairly bizarre introduction from Peter Yarrow, who knew what was about to happen since he was in charge of the sound check earlier in the day. Wald, who had access to the official tapes of the festival describes in great detail what happened detailing the high points as well as the unrehearsed train wreck that was "Phantom Engineer."

Pete Seeger, by all accounts - and this book has several accounts - freaked out totally turning colors no one had seen before, getting an axe, threatening to get an axe confronting the guys handling the sound and being told to beat it. Either way, he didn't want that baby being sung to about a bedroom window made out of bricks or Napoleon in rags or riding in a chrome horse with a diplomat and especially a song that was about not working as opposed to the glories of the worker. And of course, according to legend the crowd booed, though to this day no one is sure whether they were booing Dylan for rocking out with a band or only doing three songs and leaving. There have been bootlegs of the Newport performance around for years and not much booing is in evidence though Wald says the

directional microphones weren't aimed at the audience. Yarrow then begged Dylan who only wanted to do the three songs he'd rehearsed with the band to return, obnoxiously saying "Bobby's getting his acoustic guitar." Dylan finally returned and played the appropriate "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue" and by request "Mr. Tambourine Man."

Wald presents several accounts including the account *Sing Out!* Managing editor Paul Nelson wrote as his farewell to the magazine, which also included musician and later producer Jim Rooney's account which Nelson used to define the separation of Dylan and Seeger which it runs out Rooney wasn't thrilled about. There are numerous other descriptions by known and unknown people. The show continued and went longer than expected with Seeger apparently trying to save the night with an extended civil rights/peace in the world/all men our brothers finale, but Bob Dylan had pretty much let the air out of the Newport tire.

The next year, several of the major stalwarts including Peter, Paul & Mary and Joan Baez did not return and Newport continued until the end of the decade and was soon left behind to be resurrected years later.

A little more than a month after Newport, Dylan played his first concert that was half acoustic half electric at Forest Hills Stadium, in Queens, New York. The concert took place on August 28th, one of the few dates Wald gets wrong in the book. I [attended](#) the show and this time there was no doubt, the audience booed long and hard during the electric set, though when I saw Dylan again five weeks later in Newark, New Jersey, there was no booing at all.

On July 29, 1966, Dylan crashed his motorcycle and vanished from sight to return a year and half later a much changed man. Wald incorrectly states that Dylan would not give a concert for the next eight years, apparently forgetting Dylan's 1969 concert at the Isle of Wight.

Pete Seeger would never reach the same heights in terms of his career, though typically he probably didn't care.

Dylan and Seeger would share stages again, the first time in 1968 at the Woody Guthrie Memorial Concert at Carnegie Hall and in 1974 at the Phil Ochs benefit concert in honor of Salvador Allende. In 2004, Seeger then 85 attended a Dylan/Willie Nelson concert that took place in a baseball stadium near his home. It was reported that Dylan sent him tickets.

While Wald delves into how Dylan influenced other rockers, one thing curiously left out of the book is the reaction and Dylan's relations with the other New York songwriters he'd come with in the Village. Tom Paxton wrote an angry article for *Sing Out!* titled "Folk Rot" while Phil Ochs was

one of his staunchest defenders until he made the mistake of putting down one of Dylan's 45 singles. Within a year, two at the most, just about every singer-songwriter and folk related musician would be recording with additional musicians on their albums with varying results.

By collecting all the important recollections of Newport in one place, by presenting the facts as much as possible without taking sides and letting others tell the story, and by presenting an in depth history of all the Newport Festivals, and finally by having a musician's understanding of the music, Wald's book succeeds not only in capturing that night, but what a good deal of the 60s was like as well.